

ESTABLISHING AND PRESERVING PRESENCE AND IDENTITY: EMBROIDERY AS AGENCY IN THE RUPERTSBERG ANTEPENDIUM

Fern Poling
Smith College

Embroidery has been a part of womens' work for centuries, and was an established component of medieval noblewomens' role in society.¹ It provided women with a form of expression, an avenue for creating capital, and a way to establish status as nobility. The monastery in Rupertsberg founded by Saint Hildegard by 1150 is known to have been composed not of expert stitchers, but mostly noble women with an affinity for extravagance.² The antependium created by the nuns for the high altar displays these attributes with its lavish materials juxtaposed with its simple stitching.³

¹ Alexandra Gajewski and Stefanie Seeberg, "Having her hand in it? Elite women as makers of textile art in the Middle Ages," *Journal of Medieval History* 42, no. 1 (2016): 27; Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, "Mere Embroiderers? Women and Art in Early Medieval Ireland," in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Therese Martin (Boston: Brill, 2012), 93.

² Michael Embach, "The Life of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Jennifer Bain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 23; Hildegard of Bingen and Tengswich of Andernach, "Mistress Tengswich to Hildegard," in *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. and trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127.

³ Clare Kemmerer, "'The Nuns With Their Needles Wrote Histories Also': Donations and Portraiture in the Rupertsberg Antependium," *Bowdoin Journal of Art* (2020): 9. Cf. June Mecham, *Sacred Communities, Shared Devotions: Gender, Material Culture, and Monasticism in Late Medieval Germany* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 67).

The antependium is all that remains of Rupertsberg's medieval decor, yet it provides extensive insight to the lives and livelihoods of the sisters. Silver, gold, and silken threads embellish a large (100cm x 232cm) piece of deep red silk imported from the Levant.⁴ The color was achieved with carmine dye created from coccoid insects, a technique which originated in—and had not yet spread from—the Middle East⁵. The materials used to create the antependium were extremely precious, and were likely gifted to the nuns by Siegfried von Eppstein II, Archbishop of Mainz.⁶ The nuns would have embroidered the antependium sometime between 1210–1230, although no records exist of exact production dates.⁷

The antependium depicts Christ in Majesty surrounded by a mandorla with the inscription: “*qui me diligitis mea sit benedicto vobis rex ego sum regum statuens moderamina rerum*” (You who love me, I bless you. I am the king of the kings and determine the course of things/the state).⁸ On his right stands the Virgin Mary, Saint Peter, and John the Baptist. Mary Magdalene and an unnamed patron are smaller, tucked between John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. On Christ's left are Saints Rupert, Hildegard, and Martin. Below the Virgin and Saint Peter floats the Archbishop of Mainz, Siegfried von Eppstien II, and below Saints Rupert and Hildegard floats Duchess Agnes of Nancy and Lothloringia. The bottom corners of the antependium host the patron Godefrius (left) and the Abbess Adelheidis (right). Ten nuns border the bottom of the work, hands raised in prayer and looking up to Christ, their names inscribed above them. The nuns are the smallest figures on the antependium and are almost identical to one another, distinguishable only by their names. Finally, the patron Conradus is placed in the center of the nuns, directly below Jesus' feet. The empty spaces of the antependium are filled with either names, geometric embellishments, or nature imagery, demonstrating the meticulous arrangement of the elements and extensive planning invested in this project.

Most interestingly depicted is Saint Hildegard, portrayed as just that: a saint. At the time of the antependium's construction, Hildegard had not yet been canonized.⁹ Hildegard holds a church in her right hand and a book in her left, and is encircled by a halo, in the manner of the canonized saints around her. The sisters of Rupertsberg had begun campaigning for Hildegard's canonization around

⁴ Kemmerer, “Nuns with their Needles,” 18.

⁵ Kemmerer, “Nuns with their Needles,” 8.

⁶ Kemmerer, “Nuns with their Needles,” 8. Cf. Leonie von Wilckens, “Das goldgestickte Antependium aus Kloster Rupertsberg,” *Pantheon* 35 no. 1 (1977): 5.

⁷ June Mecham, “Rupertsberg,” *Monastic Matrix*, University of St. Andrews, accessed 16 February 2024.

⁸ Stefanie Seeberg, “Women as makers of church decoration: illustrated textiles at the monasteries of Atlenberg/Lahn, Rupertsberg, and Heiningen (13th–14th c.),” in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as ‘Makers’ of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Therese Martin (Boston: Brill, 2012), 381.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church*, apostolic letter, Vatican website, 7 October 2012.

https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html. Hildegard was not officially canonized until 2012.

the time of the textile's construction. Although their letter to Pope Gregory IX is no longer extant, his response to their letter demonstrates his acknowledgement of her works and a desire to initiate the canonization process through interviews.¹⁰ In addition to the saintly depiction of Hildegard, both Saints Mary and Rupert are depicted with imperial crowns. Traditionally, Mary wears a royal crown and Rupert a *Fürstenhut*; however, on the antependium, the nuns have upgraded their headwear.¹¹ Seeberg suggests these crownings are not coincidental or accidental, as suggested by previous scholars Robert Suckale and Tanja Michalsky, but rather that they are a further assertion of the nuns' opinions on the veneration of those saints.¹² In order to contextualize these depictions, it is necessary to place them in the context of the entire antependium and the monastery itself.

The inscription surrounding Jesus declares that it is he who “determine[s] the course of things/the state,” implying that the depictions on the antependium are representative of Christ's divine endorsements. By promoting Mary, blessed among women,¹³ their local saint, Rupert, and their monastery's founder, Hildegard, the nuns establish the importance of those in their community, and to a larger extent, women. They also include depictions of themselves and their patrons in proximity to these holy figures, extending to them the reach of holiness. Although the nuns are placed in proximity to the saints and to Jesus, they are the smallest on the parament and are not unique in their design, which could be an attempt to reflect their humility.¹⁴ Their relatively small depiction does not offer much in terms of humility when considering the gold thread that inscribes their names onto the imported silk. The reason for their uniformity and size may simply be logistical. In order to fit all ten nuns (and Conradus) along the bottom edge of the parament so as to be looking up at Jesus, they could not have been made much larger. The nuns' habits are uniform in actuality, so they must also be in embroidered depictions. Finally, when it comes to the nuns' limited skill and training in embroidery, creating distinguishable likenesses of that size could have been beyond their skillset, or even beyond the scope of what one can do with small satin and chain stitches. More important than the nuns' size and uniformity, though, is simply their presence.

¹⁰ Gregory IX, “Acta inquisitionis de virtutibus et miraculosis S. Hildegardis, magistrate sororum ord. S. Benedicti in monte S. Ruperti juxta Bingham ad Rhenum,” in *Analecta Bollandiana*, trans. Petrus Bruder and ed. Carolus de Smedt, Gulielmus van Hooff, and Josephus de Backer (Paris: Société Générale de Librairie Catholique, 1883), 116–129.

¹¹ Seeberg, “Women as makers,” 381.

¹² Seeberg, “Women as makers,” 381. Cf. Robert Suckale, “Antependium aus dem Kloster Rupertsberg,” in *Krone und Schleier: Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern*, ed. Juttia Frings and Jan Gerchow (Munich: Hirmer, 2005), 313; Michalsky, “Antependium aus dem Kloster Rupertsberg,” 400.

¹³ Luke 1:42.

¹⁴ Kemmerer, “Nuns with their Needles,” 7.

During the time of the antependium's construction, women were not permitted to enter altar spaces "*non fiat, modis omnibus.*"¹⁵ The sisters' access to holy spaces was not restricted to the altar space alone, but even to the participation in mass on high feast days.¹⁶ The administration of the sacraments was denied to the sisters, and female monasteries required male priests to come and perform the masses for them.¹⁷ The antependium was created to be displayed on the high altar, to decorate the space which was used for the most holy of sacraments.¹⁸ Due to their status as women, the sisters would not have been able to be the ones using the cloth for its intended purpose, watching as the priests used it in their stead. Further, on high feast days, when guests were present, they would not be able to even engage in the mass in a participatory capacity.¹⁹

Because the women of the Rupertsberg monastery were not permitted to be physically present or to directly participate in the administration of sacraments, the sisters found a way to do so by proxy. By embroidering themselves on the parament, they would always be present in the altar space during the liturgical season of its use. Their likenesses and names would adorn the high altar and establish their presence in the holiest part of the church, regardless of whether or not their physical bodies were permitted there. In addition to the spatial component, the embroidering of the nuns also creates a temporal component for their presence at the altar. The antependium was created with extremely expensive materials, and was made to last. Evidenced by its presence today, it has remained a precious object to those who are responsible for its care. The nuns were aware of this attribute during its construction as they were commissioned to embroider patrons and saints in order to serve as *memoria* and inspire prayer for generations to come. With this knowledge, the nuns also intended for their depictions to induce prayer long beyond their time on earth. In this way, the sisters of Rupertsberg were able to establish themselves as extended fixtures on the altar and include themselves in the spaces and ceremonies by embroidered proxy.

Beyond the restrictions to the altar space itself, women were not even permitted to touch the altar cloth, except to launder it.²⁰ These restrictions are outlined between 1133–1138 by Peter Abelard, a controversial monk and scholar known for his disputative education style and premarital affair with his wife Heloise, which resulted in her seclusion to monastic life, and his castration.²¹ Upon receiving

¹⁵ "Episcoporum ad Hludowicium imperatorem relatio," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, ed. Georg Waitz (Berlin: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1877), 4.

¹⁶ Seeberg, "Women as makers," 384.

¹⁷ Gisela Muschiol, "Gender and Monastic Liturgy in the Latin West (High and Late Middle Ages)," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, ed. Alison Beach and Isabele Cochelin, trans. Alison Beach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 807.

¹⁸ Mecham, "Rupertsberg"; Cf. Wilckens, "Das goldgestickte Antependium aus Kloster Rupertsberg," 7.

¹⁹ Kemmerer, "Nuns with their Needles," 12.

²⁰ Peter Abelard, "The Rule," in *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise*, ed. David Luscombe, trans. Betty Radice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 415.

²¹ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. Betty Radice and M. T. Clancy (London: Guy Chapman, 2003), xv, xxiii.

oversight of the Paraclete monastery as a gift from her husband, Heloise wrote to him seeking guidance on the adaptation of the *Rule of St Benedict* for women. She was concerned that women could not follow the *RB* to the letter, and would thus be condemned. For example, women required clothing to accommodate their menstrual cycles and were unable to bear the same burdens of fasting due to their nature.²²

The letters from Abelard are valuable in understanding the expectations of monastic women, yet were intended for Heloise and the Paraclete monastery specifically; this must be considered when applying it to the sisters of Rupertsberg. Abelard's response outlines many adjustments to the *RB*, including how the sisters were not permitted to touch any of the relics, altar vessels, "nor even" the altar cloths, apart from when they were brought to the women to be laundered. Further, he specifies that the women were required to await a monk or lay monk to bring the cloth to them as they were not permitted to retrieve it themselves.

The diminutive language used by Abelard to describe the altar cloth, placing it finally in his list and including the qualifier "*nec etiam*" serves to devalue the altar cloth in relation to the relics and vessels. Apart from the presence of embroidered works which developed properties akin to relics themselves, like the ability to beget miracles and merit their own veneration, even the average parament was an essential component to the altar's function as a visual centerpiece for the mass, and was a product of countless hours of skilled labor; liturgical cloths were not only of great spiritual importance, but also great personal importance to the those responsible for their stitching. Secondly of note is the requirement that the cloths be brought to the women, in particular by a monk or lay monk. The sister in charge of the sanctuary, as described by Abelard, must be "outstanding in purity of life, whole in mind as in body."²³ These are required of the presiding sister, who is not permitted to retrieve the cloth for laundering, yet they are not required of a lay monk who is indeed permitted to retrieve the cloths, and more, whom the women must await.

The restrictions on the sisters' access to the textiles only occur once they begin fulfilling their intended purposes as furnishings. Prior to their participation in the mass and their presence on the altar, the sisters spent multiple hours a day in contact with the antependium. They became intimately familiar with each of the threads—their weight, weft, and texture—in a way, more intimately related than those who practiced mass with it and used it regularly. The women are the ones responsible for the antependium's design, production, and maintenance, yet they are the ones to whom its access is restricted.

By embroidering themselves onto the cloth, the women created a way for themselves to have unrestricted access to not only the antependium, but to the altar itself. The women have placed themselves along the edge of the antependium, lining the fabric with their prayers and likenesses. They

²² Radice and Clanchy, *Letters*, 94–97.

²³ Abelard, "The Rule," 415.

look up not only at the embroidered Jesus, but also at the altar vessels and the priests. The women spent hundreds of hours creating this piece, and we would be remiss to think they did not consider their placement and line of sight in their design. In a way, it is as if the sisters themselves could kneel before the altar, or at least come as close to it as possible given their restrictions. They created this piece to reflect the radiance of Heaven with its golden threads, but also to reflect their own place in God's kingdom. The nuns of Rupertsberg were known to have adorned their physical forms with fine silks and golden rings to present themselves as oblations to God, and this mentality is reflected in the presentation of their likenesses on the antependium.²⁴ In addition to the nuns' likenesses portrayed in proximity to Jesus, the parament resides on the high altar bringing the sisters nearer to God. More than this, the act of embroidering the antependium would have been a gateway for connection with the divine.

The monastery in Rupertsberg followed the *Rule of St Benedict*, which valued work as part of the daily prayer cycle. The Rule of St Benedict encouraged monks to "live by the labor of their hands" and "have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading" as a part of their routine.²⁵ Work was not thought of as separate from prayer, but rather another avenue through which to pray. In Paul's epistles, he encourages his readers to glorify the Lord in all they do, and to "work heartily."²⁶ The Psalms also align the Lord's favor with the work of the hands.²⁷ With every stitch, the sisters were praying and imbuing the fabric with their devotion. In addition to the sisters' personal prayers while sewing, it is likely that they would have been listening to religious texts read aloud by another sister while they were working.²⁸ Focusing the mind mentally and aurally on that which you wish to glorify while conducting the work would have amplified the spiritual significance of the furnishing. The work/prayer experience would not only have been amplified aurally, but also tactilely. The repetitive motion of the stitches reflects the repetitive nature of chanting or praying.²⁹ In a similar way that the attendance of mass was a multisensory experience which inspired reverence for the divine within lay communities, the multisensory practice of embroidering would have trained the nuns' thoughts on their prayers and intensified their own spiritual experience. Stitching as a meditative practice is a well

²⁴ "Hildegard to the Congregation," *Letters of Hildegard*, 129.

²⁵ Saint Benedict, *RB*, 69.

²⁶ Colossians 3:23–24 "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, / Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Christ." (NOAB). See also 1 Corinthians 10:31 "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (NOAB).

²⁷ Psalm 90:17 "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish thou the work of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands establish thou it." (NOAB).

²⁸ Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, "Female Piety and the Building and Decorating of Churches, ca. 500–1150," in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Therese Martin (Boston: Brill, 2012), 102.

²⁹ Schulenburg, "Female Piety and the Building and Decorating of Churches," 102.

recorded phenomenon that reaches far beyond monastic communities.³⁰ In some modern communities, stitching while listening to religious teaching is understood to be a method of focusing one's attention and prayers on the content of the sermon and imbuing the garment itself with love and prayer.³¹ In this way, the nuns not only brought themselves closer to God through prayer while constructing the garment, but they also established spiritual connections through the garment itself by manifesting their prayers in physical form. The antependium was therefore not only of spiritual significance after it was consecrated as a parament, but, to the nuns, before as well.

The Rupertsberg antependium is a remarkable record of the devotion of the sisters as well as their patrons. The sisters having contributed the work, and the patrons having contributed materially and financially, both are represented on the final product. They are depicted in shimmering stitches alongside saints of importance to the Christian world as a whole, as well as to their community specifically, which placed them in both visual, physical and spiritual proximity to the divine. The womens' depictions of Saints Rupert and Mary, and in particular Saint Hildegard, reflect their beliefs as they understand God to have willed. Through the agency provided with embroidery, the sisters were able to establish their opinions on the veneration of saints. In addition, they were able to insert themselves into spaces they were restricted to and establish their participation in the performance of the mass. These aspects of the antependium are not restricted to the time in which the nuns lived, but rather they carry through the ages. Still today, the Rupertsberg antependium communicates and establishes who the sisters were and what they believed hundreds of years later.

³⁰ Heike Utsch, *Knitting and Stress Reduction*, (PhD diss, Antioch University New England, 2007); Maja Bäckström, *Hanging on by a thread: Confronting mental illness and manifesting love through embroidery* (Master's thesis, Konstfack University, 2020); Heidi von Kürthy, et al. "Embroidering as a transformative occupation," *Journal of Occupational Science* 30, no. 4 (2023). I include these references not to suggest the sisters were embroidering as a way to reduce their stress levels, but rather to incorporate the record of fiber arts' mindful and repetitive nature and the connections being drawn between handiwork and the psychological state.

³¹ Amy Miller is a Christian knitter, personal friend, and mentor with whom I often knitted during church in my youth. When asked about her experiences knitting while listening to religious teachings, she replied "I believe my busy hands are valuable for the practical end of the garment, and even more importantly, suffused with the warmth and comfort offered by a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. [...] When knitting during a service, [...] I am far more meditative in my stitches, aware of my prayers for the recipient, and more likely to practice gratitude. [...]" I would like to thank Amy for her time and thoughtful words.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abelard, Peter. "The Rule." In *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise*, edited by David Luscombe, 414–415. Translated by Betty Radice. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Bäckström, Maja. *Hanging on by a thread: Confronting mental illness and manifesting love through embroidery*. Master's thesis, Konstfack University, 2020.
- Saint Benedict. *Rule of Saint Benedict*. Edited and translated by Timothy Fry. Collegeville: Vantage Spiritual Classics, 1982.
- Benedict XVI. *Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church*. Apostolic Letter. Vatican website, 7 October 2012.
https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html.
- Embach, Michael. "The Life of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)." In *The Cambridge Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, edited by Jennifer Bain, 11–36. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- "Episcoporum ad Hludowicium imperatorem relatio." In *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, edited by Georg Waitz, 42. Hanover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1883.
- Flanagan, Sabina. "'For God Distinguishes the People of Earth as in Heaven': Hildegard of Bingen's Social Ideas." *The Journal of Religious History* 22, no. 1 (1998): 14–34.
- Gajewski, Alexandra and Stefanie Seeberg. "Having her hand in it? Elite women as makers of textile art in the Middle Ages." *Journal of Medieval History* 42, no. 1 (2016): 26–50.
- Gregory IX. "Acta inquisitionis de virtutibus et miraculosis S. Hildegardis, magistratae sororum ord. S. Benedicti in monte S. Ruperti juxta Bingum ad Rhenum." In *Analecta Bollandiana*, edited by Carolus de Smedt, Gulielmus van Hooff, and Josephus de Backer, 116–129. Translated by Petrus Bruder. Paris: 1883.

- Griffiths, Fiona. "The Mass in Monastic Practice: Nuns and Ordained Monks, c. 400–1200." In *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, edited by Alison Beach and Isabelle Cochelin, 729–746. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Heloise of the Paraclete. "Letter 6. Heloise to Abelard." In *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, edited by Betty Radice and M. T. Clanchy, 94–97. London: Guy Chapman, 2003.
- Hildegard of Bingen and Tengswich of Andernach. "Mistress Tengwiche to Hildegard." In *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*. Edited and translated by Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, 127–130. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Kemmerer, Clare. "'The Nuns With Their Histories Also': Donations and Portraiture in the Rupertsberg Antependium." *Bowdoin Journal of Art* (2020): 1–21.
- von Kürthy, Heidi, Kay Aranda, Gaynor Sadlo, and Graham Stew. "Embroidering as a transformative occupation." *Journal of Occupational Science* 30, no. 4 (2023): 647–660.
- Mecham, June. "Rupertsberg." Monastic Matrix, University of St. Andrews. Accessed 16 February 2024. <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/monasticmatrix/monasticon/rupertsberg>.
- . *Sacred Communities, Shared Devotions: Gender, Material Culture, and Monasticism in Late Medieval Germany*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.
- Michalsky, Tanja. "Antependium aus dem Kloster Rupertsberg." In *Geschichte der bildenden Kunst in Deutschland: Romanik*, edited by Susanne Wittekind, 400–401. New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009.
- Muschiol, Gisela. "Gender and Monastic Liturgy in the Latin West (High and Late Middle Ages)." In *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, edited by Alison Beach and Isabelle Cochelin, 803–815. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Ní Ghrádaigh, Jenifer. "Mere Embroiderers? Women and Art in Early Medieval Ireland." In *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, edited by Therese Martin, 95–128. Boston: Brill, 2012.

- Radice, Betty. "Introduction." In *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, edited by Betty Radice and M. T. Clanchy, xiv-lviii. London: Guy Chapman, 2003.
- Schulenberg, Jane Tibbets. "Female Piety and the Building and Decorating of Churches, ca. 500–1150." In *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, edited by Therese Martin, 245–273. Boston: Brill, 2012.
- Seeberg, Stefanie. "Women as makers of church decoration: illustrated textiles at the monasteries of Atlenberg/Lahn, Rupertsberg, and Heiningen (13th–14th c.)." In *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, edited by Therese Martin, 355–391. Boston: Brill, 2012.
- Suckale, Robert. "Antependium aus dem Kloster Rupertsberg." In *Krone und Schleier: Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern*, edited by Jutta Frings and Jan Gerchow, 313. Munich: Hirmer, 2005.
- Utsch, Heike. "Knitting and Stress Reduction." PhD dissertation, Antioch University New England, 2007.
- von Wilckens, Leonie. "Das goldgestickte Antependium aus Kloster Rupertsberg." *Pantheon* 35, no. 1 (1977): 3–10.